

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Mt Haggin WMA-South Grazing Lease Renewal

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
March 9, 2020

Preface

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared to renew the Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area-South grazing lease for a 5-year term to extend from June 16, 2021 through October 5, 2025. It would continue the current fee grazing usage of 321 Animal Units/1,188 Animal Unit Months (AU/AUM) for three local livestock producers (Thompson Ranch, Bacon Ranch and Ralston Ranch) plus an additional 178 AU/658 AUM through an exchange of use agreement with the Ralston Ranch. This would bring the total livestock use on the Mount Haggin WMA-South grazing system to 499 Animal Units/1,846 Animal Unit Months. The annual period of use would continue to be June 15 through October 5.

In lieu of payment to FWP for the additional grazing use on the WMA, the Ralston Ranch enrolled approximately 2,600 acres of deeded ground in a 15-year Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP) contract in 2011. Terms of this contract include a rest-rotation grazing system applied to Ralstons' deeded ground and 2,600 acres of their Bureau of Land Management (BLM)-Connor Gulch allotment. Enrollment in the UGBHEP contract allowed for reduced stocking rates across riparian and forested habitat that supports all three mountain grouse species (ruffed, Franklin, and dusky) as well as important elk winter range. It provided an average of 50 additional hunter days annually. The last five years of the contract (2021-2025) are contingent upon renewal of the Mount Haggin WMA-South grazing lease.

Three agencies currently administer the Mount Haggin WMA-South cooperative grazing program: Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This cooperative agency format began in 2002, though FWP has operated a grazing system on this portion of Mount Haggin WMA since 1984. The proposed grazing program and the associated UGBHEP contract with the Ralston family would encompass 12,091 FWP acres, 6,847 USFS acres, 3,073 BLM acres, and 2,600 deeded acres. The total affected area comprises 24,611 acres across state, federal and private lands for the benefit of fish, wildlife and the recreating public.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on January 31, 2020.

The following two alternatives were considered in this Environmental Assessment:

Alternative A: Renewal of the Mt. Haggin WMA-South grazing lease.

Alternative B: Elimination of livestock grazing on the Mt. Haggin WMA-South grazing system.

Public comments were taken for 30 days (through February 29, 2020). The public was informed of this EA via the following:

- Two legal notices each in *Butte Montana Standard* and *Helena Independent Record*.
- Copies of the EA mailed or notification of its availability emailed to neighboring landowners and other interested parties, including those on the Butte Area Wildlife Biologist's distribution list.
- Public notice posted on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>
- Copies of the EA available at FWP Region 3 Headquarters and Butte Area Resource Office; by phoning 406-494-2082; or by emailing vboccardori@mt.gov.

Five parties submitted comments during the 30-day comment period ending at 5:00 p.m. on February 29, 2020. Of the respondents, four parties represented him/herself while the other represented Skyline Sportsmen's Association. Four parties supported Alternative A. One party did not state support for either alternative.

FWP thanks all parties that took the time to provide comments to the Mt. Haggin WMA-South grazing Lease Renewal proposal.

Table 1: Summary of comments received on the Mt. Haggin WMA- South grazing lease renewal proposal. FWP response to comments, where applicable, are in **bold**.

PARTY	FROM	SUPPORT or OPPOSE	COMMENTS
1. Individual	Butte	Support	<p>“The program has been mutually beneficial for all concerned and demonstrates a far too rare example of positive cooperation to satisfy public and private need. The nature of the program highlights the fact that the natural ecosystem pays scant attention to artificial human boundaries with respect to what is best for the resource. The value of the private lands for wildlife and public access for managed recreation, the brokered fees for public infrastructure maintenance, and value of public lands for the benefit of the local producers are all things that should be encouraged whenever possible where the resources can be utilized in a complimentary fashion.”</p>
2. Individual	Butte	Support	<p>“By this email (I) offer full support for the MT. Haggin rest-rotation. I have seen this rest-rotation grazing allotment since its inception; it has continued to provide outstanding benefits to the wildlife resource and must continue as is.”</p>
3. Individual	Anaconda	Support	<p>“These leases seem up to par and have always worked in the past. I think it's great that the grouse have habitat in Connor gulch. This is a great grassland and plenty of room for cattle and elk. It's been managed well in the past. The only damage I've seen to riparian areas are from people and their utvs. I support these grazing leases.”</p>
4. Skyline Sportsmen's Association	Butte	Support	<p>“Skyline has always supported both rest-rotation grazing, when used properly, and multiple-use programs on both public lands and WMAs.”</p>
5. Individual	Bozeman	No position stated	<p>“I hope the managing agencies continue to be concerned about overstocking and impacts to riparian areas.”</p> <p><i>FWP response: FWP is dedicated to managing fish and wildlife habitat. Controlled livestock grazing programs on WMAs are designed with habitat conditions, capacity and the needs for fish and wildlife in mind. Permittees use mineral blocks to move cattle away from riparian areas. Cattle are moved on calendar days, even if ample forage still exists in the pasture. Pastures receive scheduled rest from grazing during the growing season at least two out of every 3 years.</i></p> <p>“Using mineral blocks to move cattle away from riparian areas is not mentioned in the German Gulch EA.”</p> <p><i>FWP response: This was an oversight. Thank you for pointing this out.</i></p> <p>“What guarantee is there of low stocking rates?”</p> <p><i>FWP response: The lessees sign a lease with the stated Animal Use. They can put less than this amount but they cannot put more on the WMA.</i></p>

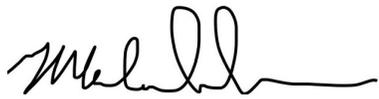
Final Environmental Assessment

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action to renew the Mt. Haggin WMA-South grazing lease, pending MT’s Fish & Wildlife Commission approval.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



3.9.2020

Mark Deleray
Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Date